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ABSTRACT

Relative clauses are useful for differentiating clearly between similar ideas. Exercises that demonstrate this purpose of relative clauses, or other grammatical constructions, can provide useful practice for students. More generally, an approach to teaching grammar that asks what purpose a structure serves can enable teachers to design exercises that demonstrate function as well as form. Exercises for relative clauses might include the presentation of situations in which the student must choose between two options and respond by using a relative clause with "that," "whose," "where," or "who," or by repeating a single form in different situations. The significant difference between these exercises and pattern drills is in the de-emphasis of form and the emphasis on the function of the structure. Exercises for other structures can be developed similarly, with the questions of what the structure is good for, and under what circumstances it is needed as the starting point. (MSE)

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THE DOUGHNUT THAT FELL INTO THE DISHWATER: THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING RELATIVE CLAUSES AND OTHER STRUCTURES

ERIC NELSON

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THE DOUGHNUT THAT FELL INTO THE DISHWATER: THOUGHTS ABOUT TEACHING RELATIVE CLAUSES AND OTHER STRUCTURES

Eric Nelson

One useful thing that relative clauses enable us to do is differentiate clearly between things that are similar: between, for example, a doughnut that fell into the dishwater and some other doughnut with a happier history. Exercises that aim at demonstrating this purpose of relative clauses can provide useful practice in grammar classes. More generally, an approach to teaching grammar that asks what purpose a structure in the language serves can lead us to design exercises that demonstrate function as well as form.

I want to present some ideas for exercises involving relative clauses. In that sense, this is a 'something you can try Monday morning' kind of paper. But at the same time, I want to take you through the line of thinking that led to the exercises, and to make a pitch for using that kind of thinking in the design of grammar exercises generally. With that in mind, I'll ask for a little patience while I lead up to the presentation of the exercises.

WHAT ARE RELATIVE CLAUSES GOOD FOR?

If I were to ask you what the purpose of relative clauses is, you might answer that relative clauses modify nouns. Well, then, what is the purpose of modifying nouns? To give more information about whatever the noun names, you might say. And what is the purpose of giving more information? To make

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Eric Nelson teaches ESL at the University of Minnesota.

something clear, so that people will know what we're talking about, perhaps. Now we're getting somewhere. Let's think about some situations in which more information is needed to make something clear. And, what's more, let's consider situations that show how a relative clause -- which is, after all, only one way of giving more information --serves a purpose that other ways cannot serve.

Let's imagine three different situations in which you want to refer to something in such a way that I will know exactly what you mean. In the first situation, I've offered you a doughnut and an English muffin. You have to choose. You say, "I'll take the doughnut." In the second situation, you have a three-way choice. You can have an English muffin, or you can have either of two doughnuts, one with frosting and one without. You say, "I'll take the frosted doughnut." In the third situation, you have a three-way choice again. Again, you can have an English muffin, and again you can have either of the two doughnuts. Neither doughnut is frosted this time, but each one has a history. One of them fell into the dishwater last night, but it's dry now and looks tempting. The other one fell into the Kitty Litter, but it too seems no worse for the experience. Maybe by now you're ready to go for that English muffin, but for the sake of discussion, let's say you're not. You say, "I'll take the doughnut that fell into the dishwater."

What can we learn from the language you used to express your choice in each of these situations? In the first situation, you said "I'll take the doughnut." The vocabulary of English offers you a convenient one-word expression, a noun, that allows you to identify what you want. In the second situation, because you were offered 2 things with the same name, you had to use a little more linguistic resourcefulness. You said, "I'll take the frosted doughnut." In this case the vocabulary of English offers no single word to express your choice, but it does provide an adjective, frosted, and the grammar provides rules for using adjectives. Frosted doughnut enables you to make your choice clear. In the third situation, you said, "I'll take the doughnut that fell into the dishwater." In this situation, as in the second one, you were choosing between two things that have the same

name, doughnut. But this time the vocabulary of English does not offer any adjective to differentiate between them. You did, of course, have some information you could use to differentiate between the doughnuts -- the information about falling into the dishwater -- but this information is rather specific, and it has so far not been necessary for speakers of English to create a word to express it. The information can, however, be expressed in a sentence: The doughnut fell into the dishwater. And the grammar allows you to encode sentence-like information as a noun modifier -- that fell into the dishwater -- a relative clause.

What I'm trying to establish here is an understanding of what purpose a relative clause can serve.[1] I'm trying to provide an illustration of the usefulness of relative clauses. This notion is an important one, and it's worth saying in another way. Again I ask for a little patience.

One thing we have to be able to do with language is refer to things. Nouns help us do this. When two things have different names (nouns), it is easy for us to refer to one of them without fear that our listener or reader will think we are referring to the other. Of course, there aren't enough nouns to enable us to refer to everything in every circumstance, so we need some lingustic tricks. We need to be able to modify nouns with differentiating information. In some cases, the differentiating information is such that the lexicon includes an adjective for it: frosted, big, gooey, for example. But just as there aren't enough nouns, there aren't enough adjectives. That is, sometimes the differentiating information is such that the English lexicon does not provide an adjective for it (much less a

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[1] I have not examined the use of relative clauses in authentic texts in any systematic way. Therefore I will limit myself to speaking about one purpose that relative clauses can serve. They appear to serve a particular purpose in my constructed examples; I am not claiming that they always serve the same purpose. In addition, what I am saying does not apply to nonrestrictive relatives clauses. See Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1983 for a discussion of restrictive and nonrestrictive relative clauses.

noun). But we can always express information in sentence form, and the grammar includes rules that enable us to put this kind of information into noun phrases in the form of noun modifiers, noun modifiers that we call relative clauses. So the relative clause is a trick of language that allows us to use sentence-like information to modify a noun -- and thereby to refer accurately in cases where adjectives and nouns fail us.

A RELATIVE CLAUSE EXERCISE: TEASERS

I think it is worth trying to incorporate this notion of the usefulness of relative clauses into exercises for practicing the structure. That is, I would like to let my intuitions about what relative clauses are used for guide me in the design of exercises. It is possible, in fact, to design an exercise based quite closely on the third situation involving the doughnuts. The student might be presented with situations -- let's call them 'teasers' -- like these:

1. One doughnut fell on the floor. One doughnut fell into the dishwater. Which doughnut do you want?

   (Possible answer: The one that fell on the floor.)

2. One person wants to have two children. One person wants to have ten children. Which person do you think will have a happier life?

   (Possible answer: The person who wants to have ten children.)

3. Two people were interviewed for a teaching job. One talked most of the time during the interview and one of them listened most of the time. Which person should get the job?

   (Possible answer: The one who listened.)

These three teasers are designed to encourage a response that includes a subject relative clause (one in which the relative pronoun is the subject of the following verb). Here are three more that are designed to encourage the use of an object relative clause (one in which the relative pronoun is the object of the verb in the relative clause):

4. I studied two subjects. I studied one in class and I studied one at home in the evening. Which subject do you think I learned more about?

   (Possible answer: The one that you studied in class.)

5. Imagine that you have two drawings. You bought one of them for $200. Your best friend drew the other one. Which drawing is worth more to you?

   (Possible answer: The one that my friend drew.)

6. I kissed one of my professors. I kicked another one. Which professor do you think was more surprised?

   (Possible answer: The one you kicked.)

Here are three more which are designed to encourage the use of an object relative clause in which the object is the object of a preposition:

7. I saw two strangers in the bus station. I talked to one of them for one minute. I didn't talk to the other one, but I looked at him for five minutes. Which one will I remember longer?

   (Possible answer: The one you talked to.)

8. There are two radio stations in town. Most educated older people listen to one of them. Most young and lively people listen to the other one. Which one do you think your

grammar teacher would listen to?

(Possible answer: The one that educated people listen to.)

9. Two beds are for sale. George Washington once slept in one of them. Queen Elizabeth once slept in the other one. Which bed would you buy?

(Possible answer: The one that George Washington slept in.)

Here are three which are designed to encourage the use of a relative clause with whose:

10. One girl's parents are teachers. One girl's parents are police officers. Which girl do you think is more likely to grow up to be liberal?

(Possible answer: The girl whose parents are teachers.)

11. One woman's name begins with K. One woman's name begins with P. Which woman do you think is from Japan?

(Possible answer: The woman whose name begins with K.)

12. One friend's mother died. One friend's father died. Which friend would you visit first?

(Possible answer: The friend whose mother died.)

Here are three which are designed to encourage the use of relative clauses beginning with where:

13. In one country, a small group of businessmen has most of the power. In one country, a small group of generals has most of the power. Which country would you rather live in?

(Possible answer: The country where the businessmen are in power.)

14. I went to two places in the woods. In one spot I took a nap. In one spot I just admired the view. When I got back, I discovered that I had lost my wallet. Which spot should I return to?

(Possible answer: The spot where you took a nap.)

15. In one room a murder was committed. In one room there is a strong smell of rotten eggs. Which room would you rather spend the night in?

(Possible answer: The room where a murder was committed.)

You can see, from the way I have grouped the items, that I am very much concerned with form here as well as with function: the exercise provides opportunities for practicing different forms of relative clauses. But the most important feature of the exercise, the feature that sets it apart from, let's say, sentence-combining exercises on relative clauses of the type found in Azar (1981:210), is the attention to the usefulness of the relative clause. The exercise grew out of a desire to reflect the usefulness of relative clauses, and each item is designed to demonstrate that usefulness. The relative clause in the student's response serves the useful purpose of making the student's choice clear.

As you read through the teasers, you probably noted some features in the design of the exercise, and some limitations and objections probably occurred to you. In an effort to deal with some of what you may be thinking, let me make a few more observations about this type of exercise.

- Teasers encourage, but do not require, the use of relative clauses. Although I have conveniently chosen to provide answers that do include relative clauses -- such

as the answer for #3, the one who listened -- you might have answered the second one or the listener. But the point is that an answer including a relative clause is at least as good as any other answer and that if a relative clause is used, it is used in a purposeful way.

- There is quite a bit of language in each teaser. It might be expecting too much to ask students to understand all the language and to respond orally. If students are allowed to take the teasers home and make their choices -- simply by underlining one of the sentences -- they will be more capable of responding in class on the next day.

- Since in each case I have called for a choice between two things of the same kind -- two beds, two rooms, two strangers -- it is natural to respond with the substitute word one: the one George Washington slept in, for example, rather than the bed George Washington slept in.

- The most natural response to each problem, to my ear, is a noun phrase, not a sentence. That is, while it is possible to say in response to #3 "the one who listened should get the job," I believe it is much more natural to say "The one who listened."

- Constructing teasers is not as easy as it may look. Assuming that the teacher wants to encourage the use of relative clauses as much as possible, there are certain pitfalls to avoid. Here is a teaser, for example, that would not particularly favor a relative clause response: You can invite either of two men to dinner. One of them is single and one of them is married. Which man will you invite? You might answer "The one who is single," but you might equally well answer "The single one" or even "The bachelor." The fault in the design of the teaser, if it can be called a fault, is that the

differentiating information can be 'packaged' as an adjective before a noun or even as a single noun. Avoiding the verb be in the differentiating information is a good first stop toward discouraging the adjective + noun response.

Another example of a teaser that would be likely to fail to elicit a relative clause response is this one: You can have either of two cars. One has no safety belts. One has no odometer. Which one would you choose? You might answer "The one that has no odometer," but you might equally well answer "The one with no odometer." What makes it so easy to respond without a relative clause is the use of have in the differentiating information (the car which has no odometer = the car with no odometer). As a rule of thumb, it's best to avoid have in the differentiating information.

- In the examples I have given, I have tried to encourage the same type of relative clause response no matter which choice is made. One student's response to #12, for example, might be the one whose father died. Another student might say the one whose mother died. Both responses, however, include the same type of relative clause -- a relative clause with whose. Therefore both responses are, in a sense, equally difficult to attempt. This feature of the design of the exercise is not necessary, of course; I could equally well ask the student to choose between a friend whose mother died (relative clause with whose) and a friend who flunked the TOEFL (subject relative clause).

Is this type of exercise communicative? It depends. If the students are encouraged to respond in whatever way they can to express their choices, then the exercise comes close to being communicative. It is, in that case, an exercise in 'referring' or 'identifying' rather than an exercise on relative clauses, and all responses that successfully communicate -- including The first one, *The friend that his father died, *His father dead -- would

have to be regarded as appropriate in some sense. If the teacher demands relative clauses in all responses (as one might do if the teasers are treated as a written exercise), then the exercise is focused more on form and less on function; it is therefore less communicative.

Obviously, the issue of what the focus of the exercise is relates very closely to the design of the items in the exercise. The teacher who wants to make the exercise as communicative as possible, focusing on the function of identifying rather than on the form of relative clauses, need not hesitate to include items that elicit responses with no relative clauses: the one with no odometer and the bachelor, for example. A more communicative approach, furthermore, would likely not limit the student's production to the statement of a choice. It would encourage a justification of that choice and reactions to the choice by others. Maria would not simply state her choice of, say, the bed that Washington slept in; she would justify that choice: it's probably older than the bed Queen Elizabeth slept in, and therefore more valuable. A classmate might point out that it depends on whether we are talking about Queen Elizabeth II or Queen Elizabeth I, and so on. Abdullah would not simply answer that the woman whose name begins with K is likely to be from Japan; he would explain that he knew of Japanese women named Keiko and Kumi and Kazuko but had never heard of a Japanese name beginning with P. A classmate might ask whether the Japanese language even has a p, and so on. Students would be encouraged to choose teasers that interest them and pose them to other students; students would write their own teasers. The activity would be conducted by students in groups, without the leadership of the teacher.

Even in its most communicative form, of course, the exercise remains just that: an exercise. Little depth or realism of communication can be expected in an activity in which students react briefly to a series of short, unrelated bits of language. The activity therefore remains contrived and game-like at best. Still, in the brief exchanges that are stimulated by the teasers, we can hope for purposeful communication of a limited kind.

If we choose the more communicative approach with teasers, we need not, of course, abandon our concern with form. We can, if we wish, follow the suggestion of George Yule (this volume) and record the interaction for later use in a lesson devoted to grammatical correctness.

A SIMPLER EXERCISE

The idea behind teasers can be adapted in many ways. Here is a much simpler exercise, presented as I have presented it on handouts to intermediate level students.

For each pair of sentences, write one sentence that includes a relative clause, as in the examples.

a) One student always comes late to class. One student always comes early.

Answers: The student who comes late should get an alarm clock.
or: The student who comes early probably learns more.
or: The teacher should have a talk with the student who comes late.
or: The teacher probably appreciates the student who comes early.

etc.

b) One horse runs fast. One horse runs slowly.

Answers: The horse that runs fast will win races.
or: I feel sorry for the horse that runs slowly.
or: I would rather ride the horse that runs slowly.

etc.

1. One doctor makes $500,000 a year. One doctor works for free.

2. One story makes people laugh. One story makes people cry.

3. One child always obeys his parents. One child always disobeys.

4. One dog chases cats. One dog chases cars.

5. One teacher gives lots of tests. One teacher gives no tests.

6. One radio station plays fast music. One plays slow music.

etc.

You will have noticed some obvious differences between this and the preceding exercise. For one thing, the 'input' is relatively simple. At the same time, the exercise requires more creativity from the student and results in less predictable language. Another difference is that this exercise seems to focus more on form: the instructions in fact say to include a relative clause. This is not a necessary feature of the exercise; the instructions could be phrased without reference to form. And in fact, we can choose to accept responses which do not include a relative clause (just as we can with the teasers). In response to an item like the one about the horses above, for example, the student might, say, speak of the fast horse rather than the horse that runs fast. If we are concerned mainly with form, this has to be regarded as a weak item. If we are concerned more with function, however, we need not consider it a weak item; we can consider it a successful item and we can consider a response like The fast horse is probably a race horse to be a successful response, even though it does not include a relative clause. With this exercise, as with the teasers, the teacher is free to choose how to focus the exercise.

Some of the comments I made about the teasers (for example, the comment about using the one in responses) apply to this type of exercise too, but a few additional comments might be useful.

- My colleague Judy Fuller has pointed out that students who are used to sentence-combining exercises may be confused by this exercise at first. They may fail to understand that they will use information from only one sentence, doing nothing with the other. The teacher, in going through the instructions, must make it very clear that the student is to choose only one of the people or things to say something about, and that the rest of the answer depends on the student's imagination.

- In this version of the exercise, only subject relative clauses are practiced. This is not a necessary limitation, of course. We can create items for practicing other types of relative clauses by restructuring the differentiating information. (Your parents listen to one radio station. Your friends listen to another radio station.)

- This exercise, unlike the teasers, will encourage sentences as answers, rather than phrases. In order to say something about the doctor who works for free, for example, the student has to attempt to use that phrase in a sentence. Some typical responses might be I prefer the doctor who works for free (the phrase becomes an object in a sentence) and The doctor who works for free will never be rich (the phrase becomes the subject of a sentence).

ONE MORE EXERCISE

The third type of exercise is the most highly structured. Here is how it appears on handouts I have given to intermediate level students:

Follow the example.

One man needs food.
One man needs stamps.
One man needs money.

Where should each man go?

to the Post Office
to a grocery store
to a bank

Answers: The man who needs stamps should go to the pos office.

The man who needs food should go to a grocer store.

The man who needs money should go to th bank.

1. One girl likes numbers.
One girl likes grammar.
One girl likes plants.

What should each girl study?

English
mathematics
botany

2. One teacher speaks French.
One teacher speaks Japanese.
One teacher speaks Italian.

Where would each teacher find a job?

in Tokyo
in Paris
in Rome

3. One boy likes boxing.
One boy likes popular music.
One boy likes politics.

Who should each boy meet?

Muhammad Ali
Ronald Reagan
Michael Jackson

etc.

The type of language that will result from this exercise is obviously very limited. The exercise is structured to elicit responses of the same form again and again:

The girl who likes numbers should study math.
The girl who likes grammar should study English.
The girl who likes plants should study botany.
The teacher who speaks French should go to Paris.
The teacher who speaks Japanese should go to Tokyo.
etc.

This begins to look very much like pattern practice, but it differs from pattern practice in important ways. For one thing, the student's attention is focused away from form (the instructions say nothing about relative clauses); it is focused on meaning: matching up pieces of information. Because meaning is important in this exercise, the student's success depends in part on knowledge of the world. The student must know, for example, that Michael Jackson is a music star, that Muhammad Ali was a boxer, and that Ronald Reagan is a politician. (If the student knows only two of these three facts, and arrives at

the third by the process of elimination, the exercise actually teaches something about the world, in a small way.)

Once the students understand how this type of exercise works, there is no reason why they cannot handle items in which more creativity is demanded. They might be asked to respond freely to questions, for example, rather than choosing from a set of answers. In this way, the student's output comes to look less like the output in a grammar drill and more like communication.

GETTING BACK TO THE POINT

As a way of getting back to the main point of this paper, let's look at one item of each type of exercise in juxtaposition:

A teaser:

> One couple wants to have two children. One couple wants to have ten children. Which couple will have a happier life?
>
> (Possible response: The couple who wants ten children.)

An item from the second type of exercise:

> One couple wants to have two children. One couple wants to have ten children.
>
> (Possible response: I agree with the couple who wants to have ten children.

An item from the third type of exercise:

> One couple wants to have ten children.
> One couple wants to have two children.

Where should each couple live?

in an apartment
in a big house

(Possible responses: The couple who wants ten children should live in a big house.

The couple who wants two children should live in an apartment.

It should be clear from this group of examples that the same principle underlies all of the exercises.[2] In every case the student is asked to make a choice. In every case information in sentential form differentiates between things of the same type, and that information is conveniently (most conveniently in the best items) expressed in the form of a relative clause in the student's response. Each item in each type of exercise is intended to demonstrate how the relative clause answers a need we have when we communicate: how it enables us to refer to something in such a way that people know just what we mean.

The approach that led to the creation of these exercises is an approach that I encourage for other activities in the grammar class. It is an approach that asks about a given structure, "What is this structure good for? Under what circumstances do we need this structure?" The exercise then follows from the answers to those questions. If the exercise evolves away from form (and becomes, for example, an exercise in identifying rather than an exercise in structure), that may be all to the good. If different forms (such as nouns, adjectives plus nouns, and nouns plus relative clauses) seem to serve the same purpose under some circumstances, then it is natural to promote practice of these different forms together. In this way, an exercise develops into something closer to real communication.

[2]See Wickboldt (1979) for an exercise involving pictures which makes use of the same principle.

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